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ABSTRACT

Research has established a reliable relationship between self-awareness and causal attribution, i.e., heightened attention toward the self increases attributions of responsibility to the self. It was hypothesized that increased availability or accessibility of self-related cognition would increase causal attributions to the self, although this effect would be due primarily to attributions for positive events. Subjects (N=44) were first induced to use either self-relevant or other-relevant terms in a story construction task. In a subsequent task, they made attributions for hypothetical situations. Self-attributions were significantly greater for those subjects who had been previously "primed" to engage in self-relevant thoughts. The results suggest that when attention is directed toward the self because of either chronic dispositions toward self-consciousness or the expression of self-oriented stories, self-schemata are more likely to become active in the processing of information. (Author/JAC)

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The Effect of the Accessibility of Self-Relevant Thoughts on Attributional Judgements

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The effect of the accessibility of self-relevant thoughts on attributional judgments

A reliable relationship has been established between self-awareness and causal attributions: heightened attention toward the self increases attributions of responsibility to the self. This effect has been demonstrated in several different contexts using mirror-induced (e.g., Buss & Scheier, 1976; Duval & Wicklund, 1973) and videotape-induced (e.g., Storms, 1973) self-awareness, as well as stable, dispositional differences in self-consciousness (e.g., Fenigstein, 1979). The effect of self-attention on attributional inferences may be seen as a subset of a more general relationship between salience and judgements of causality; that is, salient stimuli, by attracting and engulfing attention, have a disproportionately large effect on attributional judgement processes (Arkin & Duval, 1975; Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). Presumably, self-directed attention increases the salience of the self, which heightens the probability of perceiving the self as a causal agent.[1]

As Pryor and Kriss (1977) point out, however, the salience-attribution relationship is essentially a descriptive one, and it becomes necessary to specify the processes by which salience affects attributions of causality. One such mediating process may be the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Tversky and Kahneman (1974) argue that the most available or accessible cognitions (i.e., those that have been acquired and used most recently) have a major influence on future cognitions including, presumably, attributional inferences. Pryor and Kriss (1977) reasoned, then, that the salience of an element affects its availability in memory, which in turn mediates the causal attributions made to that element. This hypothesis was

confirmed by first demonstrating that the order of the "person" and "object" elements within the sentence structure (e.g., "John likes the car" versus "the car is liked by John") would affect the availability or ease of recall of each element relative to the other -- the element presented first was more readily brought to mind. It was then shown that the element that was more available was perceived as more causal (Pryor & Kriss, 1977).

Returning to the issue of self-awareness, it may be argued that self-attention leads to self-attribution by increasing the availability or accessibility of self-relevant cognitions. That is, mirrors or tapes of oneself may cue or activate self-relevant thoughts, thus enhancing their accessibility for use in subsequent attributional judgements. Recent studies have shown that increasing the accessibility of categories or concepts is a major determinant of the way in which information about others is encoded and subsequently used to make social judgements (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979). For example, Higgins et al.(1977) found that if subjects were required to use certain trait categories in the course of performing one task, those categories would become more accessible, and therefore more likely to be used in a subsequent, unrelated person perception task. The present study hypothesized that just as a specific trait could be made more available, so, too, could thoughts about the self. Furthermore, by increasing the availability of self-relevant thoughts, subsequent information should be more likely to be processed in self-relevant terms. In the case of an attributional interpretation of an ambiguous event, activation of self-relevant cognitions should increase the accessibility of the self as a causal agent, thus resulting in heightened self-attributions.

A number of studies have provided empirical validation for the firt part of the proposed self-attention $\longrightarrow$ activation and availability of self-

thoughts ⟶ self-attribution process. Davis and Brock (1975) found that exposure to a TV camera increased the availability of first-person (i.e., self-referent) pronouns for subjects attempting to translate ambiguous foreign language words; and Carver and Scheier (1978) demonstrated that mirrors increase the number of self-referent phrases in a sentence-completion task. Other research has shown that given self-attention, there was greater interference on a Stroop (1938) - type task for naming the color of self-relevant, compared to non-self-relevant, words (Fenigstein & Carver, 1978; Geller & Shaver, 1976). Finally, Hull and Levy (1979) found that dispositional self-consciousness facilitated self-referent processing of information. All of these findings, taken together, provide strong convergent evidence for the idea that self-attention activates and makes accessible self-related cognitions.

All that remains to fully substantiate the proposed two-step self-attention ⟶ self-attribution process is to directly demonstrate the second step: that the availability of self-relevant thoughts increases self-attribution of causality. Such a demonstration is the purpose of the present study.

Previous research on category accessibility has used "priming" as a means of increasing the relative availability of a trait concept; "priming" involves having the subject use the trait during a prior task (Higgins et al., 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979). In the present study, subjects were induced to use self-relevant, as opposed to other-relevant, terms in a story-construction task. It was assumed that this would increase the availability of self-cognitions during a subsequent attribution task, and that this heightened self-accessibility would increase attributions to the self. Confirmation of this hypothesis would also argue for the success of the self-relevant story-construction technique as a new and direct means of inducing self-awareness.

Method

Subjects. Forty-four introductory psychology students participated in the experiment as part of their course requirement.

Procedure. Subjects were asked, as part of two supposedly separate and unrelated studies, to 1) engage in a "language structure" task, in which they constructed a story from a given set of words; and then 2) reply to some hypothetical attribution of responsibility items.

In the context of a study presumably looking at "how verbal stimuli affect thought processes", subjects were presented with one of two sets of 20 words, and were instructed to incorporate those words in a story which described an event, its antecedents and outcomes, and the thoughts and feelings of the persons taking part in the event. For subjects in the "Self-Relevant" condition, 5 of the words in the set were intended to direct the subject to construct self-related stories; I, me, myself, mirror, and alone. For the other subjects, the matching Other-Relevant words were: he or she, him or her, himself or herself (the pronouns used corresponded to the sex of the subject), picture and together. These key words were embedded among 15 other words which were constant for both groups (e.g., afternoon, rough, walk, park, voice). Subjects were given 10 minutes to think about and write their stories.

In the next part of the experiment, which was conducted by a second experimenter (blind to the prior manipulation) in a different room, subjects were asked to imagine themselves in each of 10 different hypothetical situations (taken from Duval and Wicklund, 1973). Five of the situations involved positive outcomes (e.g., "You've purchased a horse and hired a jockey to ride the horse in a major race. The horse wins"), and five had negative outcomes (e.g.,

"After waiting behind a bus that's been stopped for several minutes, you decide to pull out around the bus. Just as you do, the bus pulls out and your vehicles collide"). Each situation was sufficiently ambiguous so that responsibility for the outcome could be attributed to either the subject or to the other person in the situation. Subjects were asked to estimate, in percentage terms, the degree to which their actions caused the outcomes, and the degree to which the actions of the other person (e.g., the jockey or the bus driver) caused the outcome, with the total percentage equalling 100. After the attribution task was completed, subjects were questioned about their perceptions of the study, and the purpose of the research was fully explained. No subject voiced any suspicion or accurate knowledge of the working hypotheses of the experiment.

The experimental manipulations yielded a 2 x 2 factorial design, with one between subjects variable (story-words) and one within-subjects variable (situational outcome). The major dependent variable was mean percent responsibility attributed to the self.

Results

Activation of Self-Relevant Cognitions

All subjects used all of the critical words given to them in the story-construction task. To determine whether the use of self-relevant, compared to other-relevant, words in the story-construction task cued more self-related thoughts, two independent raters assessed each subject's story along 9-point scales on two separate dimensions: self-orientation, defined as the degree to which the story focused on the self; and other-orientation, defined as the degree to which the story focused on persons other than the self. Scores on both scales ranged from "not at all" (1) to "completely" (9), and interrater

agreement was high (r = .72). It was originally assumed that these orientations were orthogonal, but the average ratings for self- and other-orientations were highly correlated (r = -.90), indicating that they were tapping opposite ends of the same dimension. Comparing the experimental groups with each other, it was found that subjects in the Self-Relevant condition constructed stories that were more self-oriented, $t(42) = 8.81$, $p < .0001$; and stories by the Other-Relevant group were significantly more other-oriented, $t(42) = 6.27$, $p < .0001$. This provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of the story-construction manipulation in making self-related thoughts more available to the Self-Relevant group for use in the subsequent attribution task. More generally, these results suggest that the story-construction technique may be used as an alternative and comparatively direct method of inducing self-awareness.

Self-Attribution

The mean percentage of causal responsibility attributed to the self, as a function of the experimental conditions, is presented in Table 1. A 1-between, 1-within analysis of variance yielded main effects both for story-orientation, $F(1,42) = 5.18$, $p < .05$, and for type of outcome, $F(1,42) = 13.98$, $p < .001$. There was also a marginally significant interaction between the two variables, $F(1,42) = 3.16$, $p < .10$.

Self-attributions were significantly greater for subjects who had written stories focused on themselves than for those whose earlier stories were focused on others. As suggested by the interaction, however, this effect is somewhat dependent on the nature of the outcome that is being judged. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that self-relevant, compared to other-relevant, story constructions significantly increased self-attributions when the situational outcome

was positive, $t(42) = 3.36$, $p < .01$, but not when the outcome was negative.

The effect obtained for type of outcome is consistent with previous research concerning defensive attributions, showing that persons tend to accept more personal responsibility for success than for failure (e.g., Miller, 1976; Miller & Ross, 1975; Stevens & Jones, 1976). The interaction suggests, and post-hoc comparisons confirm, that this defensive attribution strategy was most clearly in effect for subjects who had previously engaged in self-related thoughts, $t(21) = 3.60$, $p < .01$, but was weaker and nonsignificant for subjects who had not engaged in self-related thoughts, $t(21) = 1.48$, NS.

Discussion

Self-Accessibility

The present study confirmed the hypothesis that the increased availability or accessibility of self-related cognition would increase causal attributions to the self, although this effect was due primarily to attributions for positive events. This finding, taken together with earlier research demonstrating that self-attention activates self-related thoughts, provides a more complete understanding of the relationship between self-attention and self-attribution. It suggests that self-focused attention, by increasing the availability of self-cognitions, renders the self as more likely to be perceived as a causal agent. Whereas previous attribution studies involving self-awareness had to rely on very tenuous inferences concerning the role of self-relevant thoughts, the present study directly manipulated the availability of such cognitions, and clearly implicates them as a causal determinant of self-attributions.

Defensive Attributions

The experimental results also suggest that the occurrence of a self-serving bias may be augmented or facilitated by self-awareness. This is quite consistent with recent research showing that the self-regulatory processes involved in reactions to feared stimuli (Carver, Blaney & Scheier, 1979a)

or responses to failure (Carver, Blaney & Scheier, 1979b) are mediated by self-focused attention. For example, Carver et al.(1979b) have shown that when attention is directed toward the self, subjects behave in accordance with the relevant contingencies -- that is, they persist at a task when they have been provided with expectancies for success, but do not persist when they expect failure; however, in the absence of self-focus, relevant information which should serve to regulate behavior fails to do so. Thus, the evidence seems to indicate that self-directed attention may underly the operation of self-regulatory processes (Carver, 1979). If defensive attributions are construed as self-regulatory, whereby self-attributions for success are seen as self-enhancing, and non-self-attributions for failure as self-protective, then it may be argued that defensive attributions are more likely to occur when self-relevant thoughts are activated, and self-regulation processes are engaged.

Self-Relevant Story-Constructions

The present study introduced a new means of inducing self-awareness: story-constructions using self-relevant words. The effect of the story-construction manipulation on attributions, in accordance with self-awareness predictions, may be offered in partial support of the technique's success. This technique does appear to offer certain advantages, in terms of both practicality and theoretical "purity" when compared to other presently available methods of manipulating self-awareness. Some researchers have attempted to explain the effects of mirrors in terms of arousal or drive (Leibling, Seiler & Shaver, 1974); it is also possible to interpret mirror effects as a self-perception phenomenon involving attributional inferences from visual feedback (cf, Bem, 1972). The use of videotapes, cameras, or audiences not only increase self-attention, but also provide the subject with the knowledge that

his behavior is being or will be observed by others. These competing interpretations necessarily weaken the impact of any self-awareness explanation. It would appear, however, that the story-construction technique manipulates only self-relevant thoughts and thus is less subject to alternative explanations involving either direct visual self-observation or observation by others.

Another practical problem facing self-awareness researchers is the awkwardness involved in using a mirror, while attempting to convince subjects that the mirror is irrelevant to the experiment. The story-construction technique because of its plausibility as a psychological procedure, would appear to be less contrived, and less likely to arouse suspicion or yield demand effects.

Conclusions

Previous studies of category accessibility have found that once a "trait" category is primed or activated through prior usage, the likelihood that the same category will be used to process or organize new information about others will be increased (Higgins et al., 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979). The present study showed that a self-category may also be so activated, thus increasing the probability that subsequent information will be processed in terms of its relevance for the self. When self-relevant thoughts were made more accessible through use in a previous cognitive activity, the tendency to attribute responsibility to the self in a causal attribution task was heightened. It may be suggested that the increased cognitive availability of the "self" is a mediating process operating in all self-awareness phenomena.

The present conceptualization of self-attention as the heightened accessibility of self-thoughts may be integrated with research attempting to construe the self as a structure in cognitive processing. Several recent studies have now demonstrated that the self is actively involved in the encoding and

organization of personal information (Markus, 1977; Rogers, Kuiper & Kirker, 1977). For example, Markus (1977) identified persons with a well-developed and consistent concept or schema of themselves, and found that such a schema allowed them to more easily process new schema-relevant information and make judgements about themselves on schema-relevant dimensions. Rogers et al. (1977), hypothesizing that persons possess a uniform and well-structured cognitive organization corresponding to the self, found that information processed with reference to this self-structure produced an especially rich and long-lasting memory trace. Both studies thus suggest that when persons deal with information that may have relevance for themselves, self-schemata (or generalized cognitive representations about the self derived from past experience) act as processing structures through which the incoming data is organized and interpreted.

It may be argued that self-attention serves to activate these self-relevant cognitive structures -- specifically, by making them more available. As demonstrated in the present study, when self-relevant cognitions were made more accessible, information was more likely to be perceived and interpreted in terms of its relevance for the self; in effect, it was as if information were being processed through a self-schema. Whereas the present study used an experimental manipulation to increase the availability of such a self-schema, other research suggests that the accessibility of self-schemata may be affected by stable individual differences in self-consciousness: Hull and Levy (1979), in a follow-up to the Rogers et al. (1977) study, found that superior recall for information processed through a self-relevant schema was most clearly demonstrated for subjects high in private self-consciousness (see Fenigstein, Scheier & Buss, 1974);

presumably, the self-schema was more readily available to persons identified as highly self-conscious. Thus, it may be suggested that when attention is directed toward the self, because of either chronic dispositions toward self-consciousness or the expression of self-oriented stories, self-schemata are more likely to become active in the processing of information.

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Footnotes

1. As used by most theorists in this field, salience and attention appear to be inextricably related. It may be assumed under most circumstances that salient stimuli draw attention, and attention toward a stimulus is one means of enhancing its salience.

Table 1. Mean percent attributions to the self.

	Story Orientation	
Attribution Outcome	Self	Other
Positive	58.7	49.1
Negative	47.0	45.0